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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 JEDDAH 000467

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SUBJECT: WESTERN DIPLOMAT IN ULTRA-CONSERVATIVE ISLAMIC  
DRESS - A DISCONCERTING SIGHT TO SAUDIS

Classified By: Consul General Tatiana Gfoeller, for  
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. SUMMARY: During a visit to a small town in the Jeddah Consular District, a female ConGenOff decided to experience first hand what it was like to wear the most conservative type of Muslim women's clothing. The five-piece ensemble proved difficult to put on and extremely uncomfortable to wear. Most astonishing was the psychological effect on both the wearer and those who saw her. The ConGenOff noted that she surrendered her identity even as her physical freedom was constrained by the enveloping garments. Even more surprising was the effect on passers-by who had stopped to watch the transformation of a Western woman. The watchers expressed growing discomfort as the woman disappeared under the traditional costume and commented that her identity was being erased before their eyes, although they were accustomed by tradition to accept the eradication of individuality among local women. END SUMMARY.

FEMALE DIPLOMAT DONS CONSERVATIVE APPAREL

12. (C) Saudi Arabian women are known the world over for donning conservative Islamic abayas and hijab. While perusing the local market during a recent trip to a small town outside of Jeddah, a female ConGenOff came across a traditional abaya shop. With the assistance and counsel of the male shopkeeper, she transformed herself into one of the anonymous, faceless women draped in austere black fabric that are readily seen on the streets of conservative towns across Saudi Arabia.

TRADITIONAL COSTUME COMPLICATED AND UNCOMFORTABLE

13. (C) As ConGenOff learned, there are five specific steps and corresponding pieces of clothing that an ultra-conservative Muslim woman must follow as she dresses to go out in public. The store salesman carefully laid out the five pieces she would wear and began instructing her about how and when to put them on. First, she put on a pair of black polyester knee-high socks made in China. They are similar to the non-descript black trouser socks worn by many Western women, though in the scorching desert heat, they add an uncomfortable extra layer of clothing. ConGenOff was immediately aware that this transformational exercise was going to prove to be most uncomfortable.

14. (C) Next, the shopkeeper handed the female officer a pair of black polyester gloves, which she pulled up to her elbows.

With feet and hands concealed behind black fabric, the shopkeeper then handed her a thin, long black scarf with which she was to wrap her head. By this point, a small crowd of locals had gathered to see what the Western woman, a rare sight in the small market, was doing. When ConGenOff took the scarf, one of the bystanders casually declared that it was not necessary for her to wear the scarf if she was going to don the abaya. Another spoke up and said that if she wanted to be really conservative, she should wear both the abaya and the scarf. In the middle of the debate, a Saudi man sporting a traditional thobe and gutra added that, while no woman in his family wears the scarf, he knew it was the most conservative style.

#### INDIVIDUALITY IS THE PRICE OF MODESTY

15. (C) While the ConGenOff could have taken the slightly more liberal (and decidedly more comfortable) route, she chose to wear the scarf. The shopkeeper helped her wrap the long fabric around her head such that not one strand of her blonde hair would be seen, and then tucked it tightly under her chin. Now she was ready for the fourth and most important step. She pulled the long, austere black abaya from its box and noticed the enormity of it given her petite frame. The shopkeeper insisted that it was the correct size. She took a moment to examine it: void of any detail, adornment, or color, this abaya was one piece of black polyester fabric. Unlike other abayas ConGenOff had seen in Jeddah, which resemble robes that women put on like a button-down shirt, this ultra-conservative abaya had no buttons or zippers and had a built-in hood. As ConGenOff put her gloved hands through the sleeves and pulled the abaya over her head, she immediately understood its design. It prevents even the

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slightest immodesty that can occur with less conservative abayas whose snaps and buttons can expose glimpses of the clothing underneath. She also immediately recognized how hot and constrained she felt; how very inhuman she was becoming.

#### WOMEN ARE RESTRAINED AS WELL AS INVISIBLE

16. (C) More and more passersby stopped to watch ConGenOff in the shop, their interest clearly piqued when they saw what she was doing. The mood was friendly among those who gathered as they sought to make their advice known. While one man would explain how the women in his family wore it, another would say that his family members dressed in a slightly different way. In the fifth and final stage of her transformation, the salesman handed ConGenOff a special veil, also made of black polyester fabric, worn by only the most devout, conservative Muslim women. It consists of three pieces of fabric, all woven together. She picked up the veil and looked to the shopkeeper for help on figuring out how to wear it. With his counsel, she pulled the veil with narrow cut-outs for the eyes over her head. A thicker band of fabric was tied together by its two ends over the hood of the abaya and at the back of ConGenOff's head. As soon as it was tied, her eyes immediately became irritated as the fabric surrounding the "peep hole" was pulled tautly against her face and cut into the outside corners of her eyes. Another thinner layer of fabric rested on top of the piece with the eye cut-out so that her eyes could not be seen. In the end, the salesman pulled a third chin-length piece of the veil over her face. With three layers of unrelenting black fabric covering her mouth, ConGenOff found it difficult to breathe in the stifling mid-afternoon heat.

#### SAUDI MEN TROUBLED BY TRANSFORMATION OF WESTERN WOMAN

17. (C) Completely shrouded, ConGenOff took a look at herself in the mirror. Any features that distinguished her were gone. She suddenly felt what it was like to be completely anonymous; devoid of any personal identity. These five pieces of clothing had emotionally and physically incumbered her, gradually and with each additional piece of material,

until she could be seen as nothing more than a walking bundle of black cloth. Some of the male Saudi bystanders, who had grown increasingly uncomfortable as ConGenOff put on the clothing, were visibly upset when she was fully dressed. "Even my sister doesn't wear this," said one Saudi man in a quiet, troubled way. "It's like you're not you...you're not even human." Another man in the store replied, "But this is how it is. This is the most conservative that you can be!"

18. (C) It is likely that the men in the shop had never seen a Western woman "transformed" in front of them, and some were clearly uncomfortable. It is interesting that the men in the smaller, more conservative cities of Saudi Arabia are used to seeing women dressed like ConGenOff was that day, but somehow seeing her disappear in the abaya and hijab in front of their very eyes was unnerving. Some of the men began openly questioning the whole concept of such extreme conservatism, implying that if this dress is so incongruous on a Western woman, maybe it's not appropriate for their wives, either. The crowd quietly dissipated as ConGenOff began taking off her shroud, but their faces said that they would continue to ponder the spectacle and their thoughts about it. In the end, ConGenOff bought all of the pieces she had tried on and, as a gift, was given an additional no-frills black scarf with simple threaded fringe. The salesman was quick to note to the female officer that an ultra-conservative Saudi woman would never wear such a pretty, immodest scarf.  
Gfoeller